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Teaching the Holocaust in Public Schools:  
Rationale, Difficulties, and Effective Methodologies

Senior Project


In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College  
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

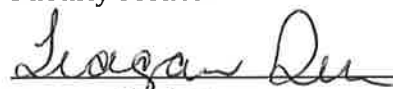
By

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## Abstract

The Holocaust, a 20<sup>th</sup> century watershed, alongside its historical significance, provides a firm foundation from which to understand moral issues and the responsibilities of citizenship. It is crucial that historical events, such as the Holocaust are incorporated into the American educational system's curriculum, as the important concepts covered within the Holocaust align with Essential Standard curricula applied in secondary and middle grade education. However, recent data has shown that Holocaust knowledge seems to have declined amongst younger generations and thus produces a concerning trend for future populations retention of the subject if continued. This paper delves into the rationale for an educator to teach the Holocaust, the difficulties that educators face when teaching the topic, and the methodologies that can be utilized in order to effectively teach the Holocaust.

Teaching the Holocaust in Public Schools:  
Rationale, Difficulties, and Effective Methodologies

January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1933, for the Jews of Germany marked the beginning of a state-sponsored campaign of persecution that would ultimately, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, engulf the entire Jewish population of Europe. After achieving power in Germany, Adolf Hitler and his associates in the Nazi movement implemented numerous laws of oppression against Germany's Jews to persuade them to emigrate. Anti-Semitic laws stripped Jews of their citizenship, forced them to sell businesses, expelled them from the professions, forbade their marriage to members of the so-called Aryan race, required that Jewish passports be marked with a "J" and demanded that Jews who lacked distinct Jewish names add either "Sarah" (females) or "Israel" (males) to their names. While these acts constituted legal oppression, the Nazi regime also employed political terror, most notably during Kristallnacht ("the Night of the Broken Glass") on November 9-10<sup>th</sup>, 1938.

For those Jews living outside Germany, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 represented a watershed, for it was on this day that the Third Reich attacked Poland and thereby initiated the Second World War. What followed was a twenty-seven month period during which the Germans scored a series of relatively easy military victories across Europe that brought much of the continent's Jewish population under their control and that created the circumstances allowing for the implementation of the "Final Solution," a program of systematic mass murder aiming at nothing less than the complete and total annihilation of

the Jewish people. The end result was the Holocaust<sup>1</sup> which claimed the lives of an estimated six million European Jews before the military power of a large coalition of countries that included Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America crushed Hitler's Germany and its Axis allies and thereby brought the killing to an end. It is imperative that the American educational system embed this historically significant event into its curriculum, as it investigates themes of morality and citizenship while fulfilling requirements found in Essential Standards for Social Studies. However, as recent data has suggested, public schools are not adequately teaching the Holocaust to its optimum potential, and thus, are creating a growing concern concerning future generations' knowledge on the topic.

In March, 2018, Schoen Consulting released the results of a Claims Conference Holocaust Poll, which tested both Millennials (ages 18-34) and older generations (ages 35-64+) on their knowledge of the Holocaust. The poll included both open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions about various aspects of the topic.<sup>2</sup> The results showed a growing decrease in knowledge about the Holocaust from older generations to Millennials. For example, in responding to question 25, which asked whether Jews were the only victims of persecution by the Nazi régime, Millennials answered the question incorrectly 15% more than older generations reviewed.<sup>3</sup> This illustrates a declining trend

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<sup>1</sup> According to its original definition, "Holocaust" referred specifically to the persecution and murder of European Jews. Today, however, an increasing number of scholars use the term broadly to include Nazism's other victims: Sinti and Roma, Jehovah Witnesses, Homosexuals, Soviet P.O.W.s and Poles. For the purposes of this paper, the term "Holocaust" will represent that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's and thus will include both Europe's Jews and other groups persecuted by the Nazi régime.

<sup>1</sup> Schoen Consulting, *Claims Conference Holocaust Poll*, (March, 2018), 1-27.

<sup>2</sup> Schoen Consulting, 1-27.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

of Holocaust knowledge showcased by Millennials in comparison to that of older generations. While this trend fluctuates depending on the question asked, it is significant enough to raise concerns about the knowledge of the Holocaust on the part of younger generations and the possible decrease that might occur as generations become further detached from the event. A key question, therefore, is; Who is responsible for educating younger generations about the Holocaust? According to the results of Claims Conference Poll, 74% of Millennials and 81% of older generations that were surveyed responded that it should be the responsibility of schools and teachers to educate individuals about the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> If this is indeed the case, if educators are responsible for teaching this topic appropriately, then teachers must be equipped effectively to do so. This thesis investigates how the Holocaust is taught in secondary and middle schools and how this impacts students' knowledge and understanding of what was arguably the watershed event of the twentieth century. Finally, the paper will suggest strategies educators might employ to achieve optimal results.

Teaching a subject as dark and disturbing as the Holocaust effectively to adolescents is an extremely difficult task, one which many educators find daunting and overwhelming.<sup>5</sup> The subject matter is gruesome and goes against the moral compass of humanity. A piece of history this weighted in heart wrenching material is scary, especially if an individual is expected to teach it properly without being adequately trained on how to do so or without being given sufficient resources on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schoen Consulting, 19.

<sup>5</sup> North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching. "Holocaust Education," (accessed April 15th, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Foster, "Teaching about the Holocaust in English schools: challenges and possibilities,"

Consequently, educators frequently have a difficult time conveying the topic effectively to students. Some attempt to glance over the material without truly addressing the horrors within it. For example, an educator may refer to specific dates about the Holocaust without going into sufficient detail so as to accurately convey a strong, constructive message for students to learn from about the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> Others become far too creative in their approaches in the attempt to engage students, and thus end by diminishing the seriousness of the event.<sup>8</sup> For example, employing a Jeopardy-like game centered on the Holocaust that provides participants with candy for correct answers makes the information seem tremendously “trivial.”<sup>9</sup>

This complexity in how the topic should be delivered to students at different ages poses another challenge educators have to confront: How does one keep the curiosity of a child focused on the subject without allowing him or her too much control over the direction of the class?<sup>10</sup> This concept is important, as author Lyn Lesch in the book *Learning Not Schooling, Imagining the Purpose of Education* points out on page 26, because “...failure to fully realize that neither intelligence nor genuine learning can proceed optimally unless they [students] have the affective power of curiosity and interest driving them forward.”<sup>11</sup> In short, Lesch contends that for a classroom environment to thrive, curiosity must be at the center. However, some researchers have

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*Intercultural Education* 24, no.1-02 (April 2013), 133-148.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Schweber, “Holocaust Fatigue”: Teaching it Today. *Research and Practice*, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pg. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Simone Schweber. “*Holocaust Fatigue*”: *Teaching it Today. Research and Practice*, 48-54.

<sup>10</sup> Lyn Lesch. *Learning not Schooling, Reimagining the Purpose of Education*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009), Ch. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 26.



noted that children are becoming less curious about the Holocaust, which both affects their learning and the teacher's decision to actively teach it.<sup>12</sup> This is "Holocaust fatigue," a situation where students are bombarded with baseline information about the Holocaust yet are never able to delve deeply into its importance. Students will thus lose their interest in the subject, as they were never given the tools to be inquisitive about the subject matter. In essence, "Holocaust fatigue" produces students who are expected to understand that the Holocaust happened, but not how or why it happened. This plague amongst students serves as a hindrance to educators, as their student's baseline knowledge of the Holocaust can falsely be identified as true understanding of the depth of the subject. The difficulty educators face in identifying true Holocaust knowledge in their classroom and how to integrate practical lessons produces a tendency for teachers to bypass the topic in favor of less difficult ones. This is problematic, as students will not gain the crucial knowledge necessary for understanding the importance of the Holocaust, while at the same time growing more assured that they already know all they need to about the topic. Because this problem proves to be prevalent in Holocaust teaching, educators must understand that the difficulty of teaching the subject and solving this problem does not excuse them from teaching it, but, rather, it should be a call to action.

Another reason educators avoid teaching the Holocaust is the failure to recognize the value of the topic in relation to that of other topics that "equally fit into their state standards." The intrinsic value of teaching the Holocaust in any classroom is that it helps to create a culturally aware student, who understands not only the concepts of justice,

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<sup>12</sup> Simone Schweber, "Holocaust Fatigue": *Teaching it Today. Research and Practice*, 48-54.

citizenship, and laws, but also one who understands racial tensions and oppression. All these skills are not only taught on end of course/grade exams (EOC's/EOG's) across North Carolina but are also needed to be a strong citizen throughout life. Students who learn about the Holocaust investigate the responsibilities of good citizenship, the importance of political advocacy, and how a major 20<sup>th</sup>-century watershed event changed human history to include worldly crimes, such as crimes against humanity and genocide. These supplemental topics which are illustrated through teaching the Holocaust are crucial in any Social Studies Education classroom. However, because educators do not always understand the value of teaching the Holocaust or how it relates to their standards, they opt to focus on other historical topics. Some find it easier to address topics which are less gruesome and more defined within educational curriculum. Because of this mentality, educators must understand how the Holocaust fits intimately within NC State Standards for History in both the secondary and middle grade curriculum.

An examination of the State Standards reveals how the Holocaust relates to all of North Carolina's Essential Standards for Social Studies in secondary education, but also how it aligns with middle grade state standards, specifically those of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> North Carolina Council on the Holocaust. "The Holocaust; A North Carolina Teacher's Resource, Featuring the Narratives of Holocaust Survivors who Became North Carolina Residents," *North Carolina Department of Public Instruction*, 2019; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "American History: The Founding Principles, Civics and Economics," *K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction*. August, 2015; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "American History I: The Founding Principles" *K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction*. July, 2013; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "American History II," *K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction*. February, 2012; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "World History" *K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction*. August, 2013; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "Essential Standards: Sixth Grade Social Studies," *K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction*. February, 2012; North Carolina

For example, according to the *North Carolina Council of the Holocaust*, the Holocaust is important to teach, specifically because “The Holocaust provides one of the most effective subjects for examining basic moral issues. A structured inquiry into this history yields critical lessons for an investigation into human behavior. It also addresses one of the central mandates of education in the United States, which is to examine what it means to be a responsible citizen”<sup>14</sup> These concepts taken from the *North Carolina’s Council of the Holocaust’s Teacher Guide*, a document crafted to help teachers in North Carolina teach this difficult subject, directly relate to the North Carolina State Standards in World History, American History I, American History II, and Civics and Economics, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies, and 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies Standards.<sup>15</sup> For example, utilizing the Holocaust to “examine what it means to be a responsible citizen” explicitly fulfills the *North Carolina Essential State Standards for American History: The Founding Principles, Civics and Economics for FP.C&G.4* (“Understand how democracy depends upon the active participation of citizens.”) particularly clarifying objective FP.C&G.4.1 which is to “Compare citizenship in the American constitutional democracy to membership in other types of government (e.g., right to privacy, civil rights, responsibilities, political rights, right to due process, equal protection under the law,

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Department of Public Instruction. “Essential Standards: Seventh Grade Social Studies,” *K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction*. August, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> North Carolina Council on the Holocaust. “The Holocaust; A North Carolina Teacher’s Resource, Featuring the Narratives of Holocaust Survivors who Became North Carolina Residents.”

<sup>15</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. “Essential Standards: Sixth Grade Social Studies.”; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. “Essential Standards: Seventh Grade Social Studies.”

participation, freedom, etc.)”<sup>16</sup> Thus an educator teaching Civics and Economics can teach the Holocaust as a way for students to understand the importance of active citizenship in a democratic government, specifically on issues involving oppression. Secondary and middle grade English instructors can also teach the subject, utilizing Holocaust related literature to accomplish their State Standards while simultaneously cultivating well rounded, culturally diverse students. However, even though the Holocaust fits within North Carolina State Standards, that does not mean the subject is easy to teach. In fact, difficulties arise in the actual teaching of the lesson as educators must deal with the ever-growing issue of “Holocaust Trivialization” and “Holocaust Fatigue” amongst their students. To address these problems surrounding the implementation of a Holocaust lesson in an educator’s curriculum, teachers need to be taught effective methodologies they can utilize.

Methodologies which enhance the instruction of the Holocaust in North Carolina public secondary and middle-grade education include investigative teaching practices, the employment of readily available educator resources, and the use of primary sources. These methodologies can help teachers avoid the aforementioned difficulties associated with teaching the topic. Investigative teaching provides students’ opportunities to investigate specific aspects of the Holocaust in depth. Moreover, it enables students to understand more about the Holocaust by allowing them to utilize curiosity driven investigation, a process that can help prevent “Holocaust fatigue” and/or boredom with baseline information. As students grow more knowledgeable, investigative teaching

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<sup>16</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. “American History: The Founding Principles, Civics and Economics.”

opens the door for students to discover new and intriguing information about a topic of which they already possess knowledge on. This creative approach can be implemented through multiple mediums, including student project/presentations and detailed guided in-class discussions. For example, a teacher can assign a class project requiring groups of students to research and teach different aspects of the Holocaust. Once completed, these individual projects create a larger body of knowledge. Another example would be to have their students investigate the fate of a specific individual or family, throughout the Holocaust, using their story as a case study of the human impact.<sup>17</sup> Many students may benefit from this academic procedure, as it not only offers content knowledge, it also teaches historical thinking and literacy skills, both of which are required for success on final examinations.

As for available resources, internet access, offers teachers far more resources than ever. Not only are there available teacher training materials, which include lesson plans, quizzes, primary sources, and investigative teaching assignments, but there are also resources that enhance a teacher's own content knowledge. Many of these resources can be found at sites such as the *North Carolina Council on the Holocaust* website, the *Facing History and Ourselves* website specifically located under the "Within Holocaust" tab, and finally the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's* online website.<sup>18</sup> Proper

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<sup>17</sup> *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Resources for Educators*, <https://www.ushmm.org/> (accessed April 15th, 2019); *Public Schools of North Carolina. North Carolina Council on the Holocaust* <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/holocaust-council/> (accessed April 15th, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> *Facing History and Ourselves. "Within Holocaust," Holocaust*, <https://www.facinghistory.org/topics/holocaust> (accessed April 15th, 2019); *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Resources for Educators*; *Public Schools of North Carolina. North Carolina Council on the Holocaust*.

resources for educators unfamiliar with Holocaust content are crucial as they can supply that educator access to a wide array of related content and even supplementary training on how to teach the subject. Websites such as the ones specified above also provide educators with colorations between the lesson planning ideas they create and the educators state standards. Resources such as *North Carolina Council on the Holocaust* give teachers extensive opportunities to undergo personal training on the topic, provide free portable museums for individual schools, provide contacts with Survivors: who would be willing to talk to the students about the Holocaust, and offers supplementary documents for the classroom to utilize.<sup>19</sup> For example, at the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* website, under the resources for educators tab, teachers can access multiple resources, including guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust, essential topics to teach, common questions about the Holocaust, and rationale as to why to teach the Holocaust altogether.<sup>20</sup> This website also lists numerous lesson plan ideas and curricular activities that teachers can employ in their classrooms. One example of a Holocaust lesson plan provided by the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* website was an investigative piece that allowed students to explore the difficulty of Jewish emigration/immigration policies/processes in order to confront a common question concerning the rising Anti-Semitic persecution in Germany: Why didn't they just leave?<sup>21</sup> This lesson plan also provided supplemental video footage and primary sources to analyze, which educators can utilize for free. In fact, many of the aforementioned websites provide free materials, lesson plans, training for educators, etc. to assist teachers

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<sup>19</sup>Public Schools of North Carolina, *North Carolina Council on the Holocaust*.

<sup>20</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Resources for Educators*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

in their quest to enlighten students on the Holocaust. These educational resources crucial for any instructor as they can provide content direction and help them avoid some of the difficulties associated with teaching the Holocaust, such as Holocaust trivialization.

Because of the availability and abundance of resources, educators are given no excuse for ineffectively teaching the Holocaust on the basis of limited content knowledge or supplemental resources, and instead should understand that they have been provided with the necessary materials to be successful.

Finally, primary sources are necessary for a fuller understanding of the suffering endured by the Jewish victims of Nazi Germany. Without primary resources, it can become harder for students to fully comprehend the historical context of Holocaust and its effect on society, as primary sources allow students access to tangible evidence on what they are studying. However, more importantly, primary sources also help students learn about the individual human impact of the Holocaust, thus allowing students to cultivate knowledge more comprehensive than baseline information. Many primary sources can be found on free websites such as that of the aforementioned *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* and the *North Carolina Council on the Holocaust* website.<sup>22</sup> Both sites contain numerous primary sources including images, documents, legal papers, stories etc. that can be employed in any related lesson. Through the use of primary sources, teachers may be able to counteract Holocaust fatigue in their classrooms, as students will grow their historical literacy skills, historical questioning skills, and gain a deeper understanding of the subject by working hands on with

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<sup>22</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Resources for Educators*; Public Schools of North Carolina, *North Carolina Council on the Holocaust*.

Holocaust primary source materials. These methodologies provide educators the ability to actively engage their students in an investigative and thought provoking study of the Holocaust while at the same time mitigating some of the difficulties found in teaching the information.

Education is crucial to the development of the individual, as it lays the foundation on which he or she understands a range of topics, as well as the world itself. Due to its importance, constant evaluation of teaching practices guarantees the information remains relevant and useful. The Holocaust was a twentieth-century watershed that students need to understand. Thus, the decline in knowledge of the Holocaust among Millennials is a disturbing development. Unless steps are taken, this decline will in all probability, increase. It, thus, falls to society, educators in particular, to tackle the difficult task of teaching the Holocaust. Though the challenge is real and success uncertain, the resources and methodology exist that will allow the committed, dedicated, innovative instructor to triumph.



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